# BLAZING THE TRAIL

A narrative of the early days of the N.W.M.P.

by

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For thousands of years the West lay sleeping, secure in the impenetrable vastness of the stretching miles. The occasional intrusion of a whiskey trader, trapper or missionary scarcely stirred its even breathing. The Cypress Hills massacre troubled his sleep and caused the coming of the North West Mounted Police Force. Then the West shook and woke to the throbing of their hoof-beats and the strange gods ot the prairies gathered their forces to bar the progress of the Scarlet Riders.

The Cypress Hills massacre of Indians by white men, witnessed by Abe Farwell took place in what is now the south eastern cornor of Alberta. Although the Mounted Police belong to the entire West they belong a little bit more to Alberta than to any other part.

Made up of remittance men and younger sons of a Victorian England and adventurers of a no longer adventurous East, the first half of the Force left Toronto in the late fall of 1873. They wintered at Lower Fort Garry. By the spring Commissioner French had succeeded in persuading a reluctant government that he needed another one hundred and fifty men. These he enlisted in Toronto. He collected the horses stores, weapons, building tools and farming implements that would be needed in opening up a new country. Traveling by way of St. Paul they reached Fargo and the end of their rail journey. They unloaded the stores assembled the wagons and set out for Fort Dufferin.

On July 8 the little Force of two hundred and seventy-five men, for half a division was being left on command, rode out of Fort Dufferin. Gallant and picturesque in their white helmets, white

gauntlets, scarlet Norfolk jackets, striped bedford cord riding breeches, brown leather belts and bandoliers, high black boots, armed with snider carbines and revolvers, lance pennons flying and the swords of the officers and sergeants gleaming in the sun, they set forth, to establish the white man's foothold in the red man's domain.

They were made up of six divisions or troops. Division A rode dark bays, Division B dark brown, Division C rode light chestnut mounts, Division D rode greys, Division E black mounts, and Division F light bays. They all used the old Universal saddle, later changed to the high peaked Californian. The stores were equally divided between the divisions. There were three hundred and ten horses including those ridden by the Mounted, one hundred and forty-two working oxen, ninty-three cattle, seventy-three double wagons, one hundred and forteen ox carts, two mortars and two field guns. The half-breeds and guides who numbered twenty drove the cows, calves and beef on the hoof. At night a zaribi was formed, that is a circle of wagons with the eastern horses unused to the open prairies inside the circle and the western horses on the outside. The Division ready to pull out first in the morning lead the train for the day.

On the Hill of the Murdered Scout they received their last mail. It was brought out to them by half-breeds who never expected to deliver it. As they could travel in country unsafe for white men the towns people had selected them to go out and find the murdered remains of the brave but fool hardy column. On every hill they expected to find the first corpse and in every valley they prepared to come upon the ambushed remains.

Gradually over the miles came a strange sound. It would die away, then come a little louder. Cautiously they crept up toward it. Little by little it grew more clearly discerible . Queer tales of prairie madness came into their minds. They stood still and listened.

The ancient hills echoed to the sound of less ancient hymns. It was Sunday and church parade on the Hill of the Murdered Scout.

Then began the long treck across the unchartered prairies. On the first night a terrible thunder storm turned the darkness into a flashing, roaring deluge. Lightening lit the sky while the Thunder God sent one of his bolts hurtling down into the centre of the zaribi. Twenty-four hours later a radius of fifty miles had been covered in an effort to round up the horses. All but one were recovered.

The God of Heat had his fling at destroying the Force. As they traveled throuth the long days not a cloud covered the sun. One day they rode sixteen miles, nearly three quarters of a days travel before finding water for breakfast. Another time they stopped and dug until reaching water. A barrel was sunk to draw it up for the horses. The place was named Police Wells which was later changed by an unimaginative settler.

The hard work and intense heat had taken its toll of the valiant horses, fifty-five of which were sick. As the summer advanced the time left for reaching the foothills in the heart of the Blackfoot country and establishing themselves in forts before winter, was shortened. It was impossible to be held up waiting for them to recover. To go on with them was equally impossible. It was here that the second seperation of the Force came about. Division A was detailed to take the sick horses and all the livestock and strike across country to Fort Edmonton.

Fifty men burdened with sick horses, cows and beef on the hoof were a perfect target for an Indian attack. The Crees on whose land they trespassed might do it for pleasure or bootee. The Stonies who were the great hunters of the plains might fancy a little tame hunting when the Mounted crossed the boarders of their territory. A wandering band of Souix might sieze the opportunity of furthering

their crusade against the white man.

And so each waved to the other Force and headed into the unknown.

The main Force continued westward over the unending prairies. They came to Woods End which meant exactly what its name implied, the end of wood. Here they stopped three days to bake enough hard tack to last for some time. The empty wagons they filled with sticks to be used sparingly for boiling water and cooking the green streaked bacon familiarly known as rattlesnake bacon. Buffalo dung would have to be used for the night fires.

It was the end, too, of rivers and creeks. It would be many days journey to fresh water. They would have to depend upon the fitful appearance of sloughs, thick with slime and reed and the home of the beautiful red-winged blackbird. First the men and then the horses would try to swallow a little of it.

Those gods vengeful of this intrusion threw another obstacle in their path. Prairie fire. It blackened and scorched the earth turning it into a fine dust which rose and filled their eyes and nostrils.

The reserve feed for the horses brought along in case of just such an emergency was used. They went on each day hoping to leave the fire blackened waste behind them. How the gods must have laughed at the little column waving its way across a continent.

The days ration for each man was cut in half. No friendly wild fowl came near. Even the gophers and coyotes seemed to have left, and the buffalo had vanished from sight.

The rations had to be cut still further.

When it seemed that the fire must have burned from the very mountains themselves, they reached the end of it. Their heartfelt thankfulness at first sighting relief was dimmed by the discovery that grass hoppers had descended like the locusts of old upon every blade of grass. Mile after mile of earth lay bare and exposed. During the day the sun blazed

down on a parched earth, but those days were growing shorter. With the passing of each one the winter drew nearer and the shelter of the foothills was still far beyond. The year before the prairies were blanketed under a foot of snow in September. Any night now would bring the first frost which heralds the early blizzards of winter.

Days passed while they crossed the swath cut by the grass hoppers. Where the insects had ended their feasting the buffalo had begun. The great shaggy animals had eaten or trampled under foot every clump of grass. A herd of thousands where once there were millions must have passed. They were probably travelling night and day on their annual trek deep into the foothills.

For many miles the country had failed to provide food for men or horses and the need was becoming desperate. The Commissioner ordered the best horses and several wagons to go south to find food of some kind. Meanwhile the rest continued the westward journey to Old Wives Lake. It was late at night when they arrived at this point and their joy at finding water and a little feed for the horses was unbounded. Quickly they made camp in the darkness and set about washing off some of the dust and grime of the passed weeks. It was a glorious feeling to sumerge in the cold refreshing water of that small lake. Before morning they were wishing they had never seen tha lake. Unknowingly they had camped on a site recently vacated by a small tribe of northern Indians. Their legacy was fleas.

Big fleas and little fleas by the score and the hundred. They swated and brushed them off. It was spring beforethey were free of them after taking it in turns all fall and winter to boil their clothes.

The wagons under Assistant Commissioner MacLeod pulled into camp bringing with them two tons of pemmican. The dried strips of leathery meat were a feast after the quarter rations of stale hard tack.

A change of horses and MacLeod set off once more. This time to

find the Boundry Commission's cach of grain hoping it would not have been robbed. They found it safe and containing sixty thousand pounds of oats.

Now that men and horses were provided with food they prepared to face another difficulty. For some time it had been suspected that the maps were false and the guides hoplessly lost. After bluffing and misleading them many miles the guides admitted they were in unknown terrritory.

To the north and west scouting parties hunted for the Fort Whoop Up trail or for grazing ground. Five men and twenty-six horses were sick so the Commissioner decided to establish a camp for them. It became known as Cripple Camp.

On August 19 the main Force moved off leaving the sick men to be picked up again late in the fll by the Commissioner and Divisions D and E on their return journey to Swan River.

All scouting parties returned unsuccessful in their hunt. The horses were showing signs of thir hardships and the men were as lean and brown as corn stalks. It was necessary for each man to give one of his two blankets to his horse. The north wind came driving before it small stinging particles of snow. The Mounted Police lead their horses now instead of riding them.

It seemed as though Fort Benton, Montana was the only refuge. This was a bitter thought after all the eastern and American newspapers had said of the men who rode in scarlet. Before they had set out the papers had accused them of trying to annex Montana, of cowardice saying they would give up and be back within a year and of any and every failing they could imagine, for many eastern taxpayers fought against the Mounted begrudging the slight cost of their maintenance.

As the wind grew fiercer and the snow driffed deeper and food was something they thought about not something they ate, it seemed that none would live to see Fort Benton. The wind swirled from every direction as the sky darkened to an inky looking mass. The wind settled down to

an icy blast from the west. A gap appeared in the clouds over the west resolving its self into an arch of pale green satin over hung with dark velvet. It was an unkown phenomenon and frightened the superstitious guides.

Suddenly the miracle of the chinook was up on them. The warm dry wind swooped down and licked up the snow. Is seemed as if one of the strange gods was relenting.

An advance scouting party sighted the buffalo. First one, then a dozen, then several hundred could be seen threading their way across the plain below and into the hills beyond. The stragglers to the side provided meat in plenty.

And so they advanced. No trace of Fort Whoop Up could be found by the scouting parties.

Then the Great Spirit seened to over rule these strange gods of the wilderness, for one of the advance scouts idly plucked a blade of grass showing through the rapidly disappearing snow. He sniffed. Here was the place they had been making for all through the terrible months of heartbreaking hardships. The Sweet Grass Hills.

Now began the great work of building their bases from which to carry out the duties for which they were organized, eight hundred miles from reinforcements. Commissioner French took the two Divisions D and E and a few other men with the best of the horses and went on to Fort Benton.

When they had gathered up supplies the two divisions headed back to Cripple Camp and then on to Swan River where the Government was supposed to have a barracks awaiting them. Whether the Government or the contractor was responsible for what they found was never proved. The barracks were small and draughty and built on rough stony ground lacking suffient grass. It was too small to support two divisions for the winter so one had to go still further to Fort Garry.

Meanwhile the men left at Fort Benton returned with supplies to the

main Force. They found a site on the Old Man river, twenty miles above its junktion with the Belly river had been chosen for the fort.

Still a further weakening of the Force took place before winter when it was found necessary to take some of the horses to the better feeding grounds at Sun River, Montana.

So this little Force of considerably less than one hundred and fifty men was stranded in the heart of the Indian country. After travelling nineteen hundred miles they were without shelter with the November snow lying thick on the ground. Their uniforms were badly worn and they found it necessary to belt blankets around them and raw buffalo hide over their boots. Across the boarder regiment after regiment was needed to do the work they were expected to preform.

The first quarters bo be erected were the stables. When the horses were adequatly sheltered a barraks for sick men was built. One morning there were forty-five of these men unfit for duty. Then came quarters for the ranks and last of all barraks for the officers. The buildings were constructed of cotton wood logs chinked with frozen mud, the roofs were made of logs and then thatched.

The Blackfoot chiefs were beginning to pay calls and each one had to be returned with all the ceremony possible by MacLeod and an escort of a dozen men, for the Indians judged ~~each~~ others by their magnificence.

At Christmas time all were sheltered by a roof of some sort. A months pay was voted to provide a Christmas feast for the chiefs and many of their tribes as a gesture of friendliness. Troop A at Fort Edmonton did the same for the northern Indians and all settlers in the region. These gestures were an inspiration for they were something totally unexpected and started the Force off in a better way than any treaty which could have been devised by a government could have done.

On the first of January occured the deaths of two constables who were badly frozen while coming in from patrols on Christmas day. The

first graves were dug at Fort MacLeod for the first of the men in scarlet to give their lives to the foothill country.

And so having faced all that the strange gods of the prairies could send them, the North West Mounted Police prepared to face the future. In the next few years of which they were to save for the Dominion a country larger than inhabited Canada, at a cost of less than a dollar per square mile.

As for the North West Mounted Police themselves they have become one of the great legends of the Northwest as well as the most slogan bedeviled Force of all time.

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